

Generations

Active Lifestyles for the 50+ Generation

Plan Ahead To Stay Safe & Independent In Your Home



by Bob Wood

People are living longer and healthier lives. We value independence and seek to maintain it as long as possible. So it makes sense to plan for and make certain modifications now—to maximize safety and accommodate future injuries or physical disabilities.

Homeowners need to consider several issues as they age in-place, including accessibility, comfort, and safety. To illustrate, let's focus on the example of wheel-chair accessibility. Look around your home and think about how you would function if you were suddenly confined to a wheel chair. Could you maneuver in the bathroom? In many cases, just changing the sink and vanity combination to a wall-mounted sink or even a pedestal sink will facilitate wheel-chair access.

Similar changes can be made in the kitchen. Consider installing a shallow sink and customizing the cabinetry so you can pull up more easily to the sink. A goose-neck faucet is also helpful for those confined to a chair.

What about your home's entrance? Can a person with a wheel-chair, cane, or walker easily get into your home? Are there many steps? If your entrance is challenging, consider installing a ramp well before you need one. Don't make it too steep—a common mistake of the do-it-yourselfer. If a ramp is too steep, a person without assistance, particularly, might not have enough upper body strength to ascend the ramp, and descending can be dangerous and scary.

A ramp's angle should be no more than eight percent or one foot for every one inch in height of the stair(s). In the case of two seven-inch stairs, a 14 foot ramp would be needed to accommodate the 14 inches in height.

For the edges or ramps, install 2" x 2" boards on both sides of the ramp surface to prevent the wheel-chair from falling off either side. Make it easy to navigate by adding hand rails, avoiding carpeting, and making the surface anti-slip by adding grit to the paint. Finally, consider adding a landing. Landings are good for breaking up long distances and facilitating turns. They also make nice places to rest.

Inside the house, consider adding hand rails and grab bars for security and safety. We're no longer limited by wall studs; new fasteners now allow greater flexibility and safety, so you can put bars almost anywhere you prefer, including on fiberglass shower surrounds.

For hand rails, remember to allow finger space for wrapping a hand around the banister. If you do it yourself, a 2-inch block of wood behind each mounting bracket will allow enough finger room.

Of course the list can go on and on, but the idea here is simple. With some pre-planning that starts with an objective audit of your home, you can maintain independence without spending much money. Plus, you can rest assured that you won't have to make such modifications in a panic if you have an accident or become disabled.

Robert Wood is president of Wood Builders Collaborative, LLC a home remodeler. He performs accessibility audits and recommendations consistent with the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) modifications and teaches ADA compliance to Architects. He can be reached at 410.750.0890 or by email at BobWood@BuiltByWood.com.